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Addressing professional challenges in working with Homeless Greenlanders in Aalborg, Denmark

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Towards Indigenous Social Work practice: Addressing professional challenges in working with Homeless Greenlanders in Aalborg, Denmark

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Abstract

The article discusses the challenges within social work practices with the homeless Greenlandic population in Aalborg, Denmark, based on a case study at the Aalborg University. Interviews were conducted with social workers from service organizations across the Aalborg municipality. The findings are analyzed by drawing on a theoretical framework which addresses the role of social workers and social service institutions that support homeless Greenlanders to adjust to life in Denmark. Indigenous social work is presented as an alternative practice method to mitigate existing challenges within the field and to create culturally appropriate services. The findings revealed that cultural differences pose a fundamental challenge to the effective helping process of homeless Greenlanders in social work practices. Plausible recommendations for practice will be identified.

OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

The research aimed to uncover the challenges and factors affecting social work practice with homeless Greenlanders, a qualitative and exploratory approach (Major & Savin-Baden, 2010) was used to analyse the views of social workers on the subject matter. Three organizations working with homeless Greenlanders in Aalborg were selected purposively for the study. The organizations involved in this study are: a day and night shelter that receives homeless people in Aalborg; a public residency that supports the

homeless (Greenlanders among other populations such as Danish, Eastern Europeans and Middle Easterns); and, an institution that offers educational and training programs specifically for Greenlanders who are in a vulnerable situation.

Five social workers were selected through purposive/judgmental sampling based on their experience and position in their respective organizations. Techniques used for data collection in qualitative in-depth interviews were used to extract the necessary information from the key informants as a questionnaire with open-ended questions and secondary data collection through reviewing documents, research, guidelines and policies on social work practice with homeless immigrants were done to enrich the primary data.

The lack of literature and studies with particular focus on social work with homeless Greenlanders was the main limitation in this study. In addition, language constraints hindered the researchers' ability to review and incorporate information from some literature written in Danish. The generalizability of the results were limited only to the subjects under the study; and were used to inform the broader discussion of Indigenous Social Work (ISW). The research could not include the views of homeless Greenlanders due to ethical concerns highlighted by the target organizations. The research upheld the ethical values of the profession it supports and as such did not impose involuntarily on human beings. Considering ethical aspects and possible practice dilemmas, each informant felt liberated in their ability and right to decide freely how to participate.

DECOLONIZING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GREENLAND AND DENMARK

The relationship between Denmark and Greenland is based on a complex case of colonization from the 18th century and its remnant power dynamics. Greenland was a colony of Denmark for more than two hundred years. During this period the Danish administration was responsible for a strong "Intellectual Power" influence in Greenland and behaving as an "elite" group, imposing religious beliefs and creating visible discrimination against the native population of Greenland - known as the ethnic Inuit indigenous community (Petersen, 1995).

At the end of 2008, the country gained greater autonomy from Denmark (Nuttall, 2008). But even after formal decolonization, Denmark continued influencing Greenland

(Loukacheva, 2007). "Together with the end of the formal colonial state, the reservation status of Greenland ceased, but modernization made Greenland economically more dependent on Denmark than ever." (Petersen, 1995, p. 65).

Greenlanders have been noticeably migrating to Denmark (Petersen, 1995); but even though they are citizens of the Danish Kingdom, a parcel of them face exclusion and vulnerability. Greenlanders in Denmark are 47 times more likely to end up homeless compared to native Danes, and 12 times more likely to be in treatment for alcohol abuse (Lysemose, 2015), experiencing social marginalisation, prejudice and stereotypes after arriving in Denmark (Madsen & Sullivan, 2003; Madsen & Sullivan, 2003; Jensen *et al*, 2010).

Considering the extensive welfare system in Denmark, social services act as the structural interface through which Greenlanders access support programmes (Dominelli & Moosa-Mitha, 2016). But despite the extensive programmes geared towards helping the homeless and migrant populations in Aalborg, a large minority of Greenlanders remain visibly marginalized (Lysemose, 2015).

Social workers are fundamental actors in addressing the problem of homelessness in Aalborg and homelessness among Greenlanders, by extension (Dominelli & Moosa-Mitha, 2016). The complexity of socioeconomic, cultural and political factors affecting the situation with Greenlanders poses implications to social work practice; as marginalised Greenlanders arguably have differing needs from other marginalized Danish citizens (Dominelli & Moosa-Mitha, 2016). Social workers often fall within the intersection of such vulnerabilities which pose practice challenges in building programmes and services that are tailored towards meeting the needs of homeless Greenlanders and helping them to integrate into conventional life in Denmark.

INDIGENOUS SOCIAL WORK AS A CRITICAL APPROACH

ISW within this context calls for a configuration of inclusion of Greenlanders in Denmark. Homelessness faced within indigenous identity creates a form of social isolation and deprivation that underscores the subsequent social exclusion from mainstream society (Hunter & Jordan, 2010; Horsell, 2017). Social inclusion has thus been used as a socio political response to address the intersecting disadvantages affecting Indigenous

communities (Hunter & Jordan, 2010). Understanding how indigenous identity works in tandem with the experiences of being a migrant and homeless is thus critical to social work practice within this domain. ISW thus calls for the understanding of a sense of social inclusion that is unique to the Indigenous experience and facilitates a professional rethinking of representation (Malone, 2007; Hunter & Jordan, 2010).

The data analysis elucidates that social workers should employ culturally appropriate services and methodologies that promote consistent reflection and adjustment on the ways in which power shows up in practice and; enable homeless Greenlanders to feel empowered to manage personal challenges such as substance abuse and utilize individual strengths in order to better cope and manage life in Aalborg. ISW is a model which aims at developing and implementing social work interventions rooted in the culture, philosophy and perspectives of local indigenous communities instead of imposing Western or imported theories and approaches in social work practice (Gray & Coates, 2010). By adopting ISW, practitioners working with homeless Greenlanders will have deep understandings of the Greenlandic community including their historical, social and cultural background. Resulting in the design and implementation of culturally appropriate interventions. Moving beyond small scale projects and services, the approach may help organizations to reconsider the settings, structures and the service environment including the buildings and facilities to fit with the expectations of homeless Greenlanders and to also devise methods that include the participation of Greenlandic community leaders in the decision making process.

Employing social workers and other staff members who are Greenlandic and/ or have an extensive background in indigenous, Greenlandic culture was an essential part of this process for targeted social service institutions. Some services for the Greenlanders in Aalborg, although geared towards satisfying the needs of the Danish job market, incorporated features of Greenlandic culture. For example, practitioners used Greenlandic artwork to aesthetically create a more familiar environment for service users and some of the materials and sharpening tools used in the woodwork training sessions were directly imported from Greenland. Greenlandic cultural wear and products such as Seal skin slippers and a thick woollen material called ‘holmensklæde’ (literally island cloth) were

also made in workshops, which were later placed for sale on the organisation's website and the adjoining store.

The interviews conducted revealed that the treatment of drug and alcohol abuse of Greenlanders often involved a 'naming' and pathologization of their daily lives that often overlooked the cultural perceptions and relationship towards addiction and its treatment in Greenland. Indigenous knowledge has been given an inferior status when positioned with westernized 'expert professional knowledge' (Chilisa, 2010), resulting lack of recognition to integrate indigenous world views of spirituality and healing is a gap and acts as a form of symbolic violence (Briskman, 2010). Although Indigenous knowledge exists naturally and is endemic to the community's condition, it must go through an anti-oppressive, social justice oriented and systematic process of discovery to modify services to address local needs (McCormick, 2000). For instance, one of the organisations utilizes a visiting Addiction Counsellor from Greenland to host individual and group therapy sessions with Greenlandic service users. However, this counsellor is hired separately by the Kommune and visits 2-3 times every other week or once per month. Utilising the proposed indigenous framework calls for such a service to be more consistent, collaborative and educational in nature.

One of the social workers reflected that the Danish housing system is not structured to accommodate the Greenlandic lifestyle, which is generally more communal and less individualized. Greenlanders value living with a larger group of people, while the Danish welfare system is structured to accommodate single individuals or small families. This organisation pointed out that although establishing more communal housing may pose a risk in enabling harmful behaviours such as drug abuse and violence, they believed that taking this approach would promote individual autonomy and stability through community building. Thus, the nature of indigenous practice in some cases, radicalises social work practice as it calls for practitioners to use their professional power to advocate for the needs of Indigenous people from the systems that inadvertently oppress them (Baines, 2017), extending to the importance of addressing the role of power in building culturally sensitive that will help them to integrate to life in Denmark (Weaver, 1999).

VIEWING GREENLANDIC HOMELESS ISSUES IN DENMARK THROUGH AN IMMIGRATION AND CULTURAL LENS

For most Danes, being Greenlandic means having serious social and substance abuse problems, and to some it even means coming from a backward culture. “So what do Danes envision when they think of Greenlanders? (…) They are often homeless and flagrantly drunk, contrasting sharply with a relatively reserved Danish culture,” (Madson & Sullivan, 2013, p. 1*).* Greenlanders only constitute approximately 10% of the Greenlandic population in Denmark. Thus the vast majority of Greenlanders, estimated to be between 7,000-9,000, lead lives similar to that of any other Dane but nevertheless have to reckon with an unfair and misrepresentative stereotype of indigence (Madson *et al*, 2005).

Madison and Sullivan (2003) tried to see the challenge of Greenlanders in Denmark through an immigration and legal perspective. For them, the tension symbolizes an attempt to balance two identities, Denmark’s legal blindness to Greenlandic identity creates its own set of problems. The lack of adequate legal recognition to Greenlander´s unique identity and culture made social services to the homeless also ineffective. The Greenlandic culture, emphasizing humbleness and not interposing oneself, spells out the need for proactive outreach work focusing on the most disadvantaged of the group, especially the homeless. The main purpose of such activities is to gain the trust of the worst off Greenlanders.. Only after such a trust has been established, counselling can begin, as one of the social workers suggested.

Our field study confirms the above concern as we found that drug and alcohol abuse, mental health challenges and a lack of understanding how to access welfare benefits and/or managing such funds further marginalized and excluded homeless Greenlanders from engaging in the wider society. Subsequently, impaired social skills, communication skills, and unstable or non-existent social network makes negotiating the demands of “normal” Danish life nearly impossible for most homeless people (Lysemose, 2015). This exclusion of homeless people poses a problem in social work practice and is backed by invisible forces which restrict the choices of homeless immigrants in Denmark.

Although services such as social security and medical care are available, they are not generally accessible for homeless people due to limited social skills for navigating in

the welfare state as well as bureaucratic processes and laws that define eligibility to access services (Edgar *et al*, 2004). As such, there is a need to extend interventions to cover a wider demographic of homeless individuals who have addiction problems and dual diagnoses, and who also have a high risk of falling through the welfare safety net (Benjaminsen, 2016).

Cultural differences, empowerment and power dynamics were identified by social workers to be the main factors contributing to challenges of helping homeless Greenlanders to adjust to life in Denmark. A manager of one of the organisations stated that cultural differences inform the major needs of Greenlanders and elaborated that they "*don't know the order that we live under here in Denmark (...) they are challenged by the schedules and all the things to live up to and that can be difficult to help them because when they have a schedule with the Kommune, they don't show up because the clock is not so important"*. This coupled with the state of homelessness is significant challenge for professionals in Aalborg to tackle. All participants identified language barriers as being one of the biggest challenges of working with homeless Greenlanders. The social workers stated that many of their service users do not speak Danish efficiently and this alienates them both within the social service space and in the general Aalborg community. In one of the organizations, there was a trial to recruit a Greenlandic social worker but with no success. In addition, social workers believe that Greenlanders should also be accountable for not learning Danish which could have helped them to smoothly integrate into the system and culture. Learning Danish is thus seen as a form of symbolic capital that would help Greenlanders to be socially included in Aalborg.

Other challenges included a lack of motivation and willingness from the client's` perspective. The challenge of keeping homeless Greenlanders empowered is strongly connected with their willingness to be motivated enough to engage in the process of ordinary life in Denmark and to feel empowered by their own skills and values, to contribute to society. As reflected by one of the social workers, the most important thing is to be part of the society and to not be isolated. This requires motivation from the service users so that social workers can help them to properly function and thereby lead a normal life in Denmark. Greenlanders are thus left oscillating between the desire to return to the place they left or stay amidst the tensions of cultivating a new home in Denmark.

Each challenge and need of homeless Greenlanders, is complex and implicitly or explicitly connected to sociocultural experiences and realities stemming from their native land. This signifies the need for culturally sensitive and relevant social work practice which will be discussed in the following section.

SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

OVERVIEW

The data analysis elucidated that social workers should employ culturally appropriate services and methodologies that: (1) Promote consistent reflections and assessments on the ways in which power shows up in practice; (2) Develop professional skills that align with culturally relevant, indigenous practice.; and (3) Enable homeless Greenlanders to feel empowered to manage personal challenges such as substance abuse and to utilize individual strengths in order to better cope and manage life in Aalborg. Considering this, we recommend the social workers take an indigenous approach to practice methodology that draws on anti-oppressive and participatory-based methodologies.

ISW aims to develop and implement social work interventions rooted in the culture, philosophy and perspectives of local indigenous communities instead of imposing Western or imported theories and approaches in social work practice (Gray *et al*, 2008). It is concerned with bringing up and using indigenous and local ways of approaching social problems while simultaneously challenging prevalent or Westernized models to be locally and culturally relevant (Gray & Coates, 2010). By adopting ISW, practitioners working with homeless Greenlanders will have a deep knowledge of homeless Greenlanders including their historical, social and cultural background; and design culturally appropriate interventions and research. The approach will help organizations to reconsider the settings, structures and the service environment including the buildings and facilities to fit with the expectations of homeless Greenlanders and to also devise methods that include the participation of Greenlandic community leaders and members in the decision making process. The resultant process leads to the decolonisation of social work research and practice that is able to assess the ways in which practice methods, ideologies and

assumptions are grounded in colonial and problematic approaches to minority groups (Rowe *et al*, 2015).

For instance, communalism is a central theme in Greenlandic culture and represents the fundamental value of indigenous culture to foster harmony, collective support and wholeness among members of the community (Hart, 2008). Social workers noted that Greenlanders typically form close knit groups, making their own subculture and as such are not prone to socializing outside of their community. The general feedback was that the individualized lifestyle in Denmark differs from the Greenlandic way of living which often creates tensions between both groups. Kaleb, another social worker, articulated contrasting views. Although he acknowledged the presence of stigma and discrimination towards Greenlanders, he felt that the average citizen of Denmark perceived Greenlanders to be their '*brothers and sisters.* The underlying issue here was identified to be the opposite of Damion's explanation. Kaleb reflected that the main barrier towards the social inclusion of Greenlanders was in actuality, their lack of willingness to learn Danish and to socialize with other citizens in Denmark. He went on to illustrate, "*they think we are colonist...they look at us with different eyes than we do at them".* This analysis also does not explore how this colonial past may manifest into everyday racism and how the in-group formations of Greenlanders also serves as a cultural coping mechanism (Meldgård, 2016). This lends to the point that social work must take place in a socially conscious and culturally aware environment where practitioners have "working knowledge" about indigenous communities' social ties and attachments (Green & Baldry, 2008, p. 390).

DEVELOPMENT OF INDIGENOUS SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION AND CULTURAL COMPETENCY SKILLS

None of the social workers interviewed were familiar with the notion of ISW practice. However, services such as technical workshops to teach the building of Greenlandic woodwork exemplified practitioners' commitment towards building culturally relevant practice. Within each organisation, Greenlanders had a close rapport with the practitioners as they often engaged in open and intimate dialogue with each other. The incorporation of participatory-based and culturally sensitive work had inadvertently allowed them to practice principles of ISW. Gray *et al* (2008, p. 58) take a similar position

in noting that though professionals are critical in noting anti-oppressive terminologies and approaches, most "social workers are not living it from an expressively critical paradigm". This emphasises the need to strengthen ISW education and practice to further support existing practice methods that are geared towards the inclusion and empowerment of indigenous populations (Hertel, 2017).

Introducing problem solving education coupled with practice that would highlight the importance of language in Indigenous contexts are crucial to this indigenization process of community work (McGloin, 2014). One critical element to note is the deliberate lack of euphemisms in ISW in naming oppressive practices and recognizing the colonial underpinnings of institutional care (McGloin, 2014; Hertel, 2017). The inculcation of decolonizing discourse raises concerns about human rights violations and helps to remove the myth of an indigenous resettlement that is void of conflict and trauma (Tamburro, 2013; McGloin, 2014). Building a good relationship was identified synonymously with building good communication rapport with service users. Social workers felt that especially considering cultural and language differences, it was an important role and function for them to build an engaging relationship with homeless Greenlanders.

However, the social workers lamented that it was proving difficult to find trained Greenlandic social workers in Denmark and as such there was not a significant representation of Greenlandic service providers in the organisations. With the exception of one programme director who was of Greenlandic origin, none of the social workers could speak Greenlandic. Therefore, this study proposes that social workers engage and participate in critical parts of indigenous culture, including the language. This would call for social workers to learn basic Greenlandic words or sentences as a symbol of harmony and support. Greenlanders often use their language as a tool of resistance to dominant Danish culture in order to uphold their identity and community capital, especially amidst a new environment in which they do not feel included (Meldgård, 2016). As such, social workers incorporating Greenlandic language in their work demonstrates a form of cultural literacy which presents a strategic engagement with the cultural habitus of Greenlanders and enable critical self-reflexivity (Webb *et al*, 2002). This would create a space of cultural exchange that may help homeless Greenlanders to feel appreciated and included.

According to Madsen and Sullivan (2003), Greenlanders have their own way to communicate and are generally less outspoken than other minority groups in the public sphere. Help seeking is a taboo for Greenlanders and foreign to cultural behaviour as they are often docile in advocating for their needs when treated unfairly or according to the relevant standards (Madsen & Sullivan, 2003). Practitioners should try to understand these cultural differences by using what Weaver (1999, p. 223) categorizes as 'containment skills', such as "patience, allowing productive silence, practicing active and sensitive listening", opening possibilities and encouraging them to speak for themselves.

SOCIAL POLICIES AND SERVICES SUPPORTING THE GREENLANDIC COMMUNITY

The anti-oppressive character of the indigenization process underlines the political nature of ISW practice in recognizing power differentials- both those formed in everyday practice; and systemic policy formation and governance (Coates & Gray, 2008). Haug (2005) argues that such power differentials marginalised 'local, oral and indigenous knowledge traditions' (Haug, 2005). In this case, social workers have a responsibility in advocating and contributing to the implementation of more comprehensive and effective policies (King *et al*, 2017). Translated into practice, we may think of this as hiring indigenous social workers, strengthening political ties between Greenland and Denmark, and the formation of more comprehensive policies.

Respondents noted that social work services for homeless Greenlanders are appreciated by politicians and the government; and there is continuous communication such as exchanging reports and registration documents among the relevant authorities. A representative from one of the organisations, Dustin, further explained that his organization is selected by the Kommune to be a school for Greenlanders in Aalborg. As such, he is in frequent dialogue with the municipality regarding both achievements and challenges in delivering educational programmes. Furthermore, each social worker acknowledged the significant strides that were made by the Danish government to compensate for historical grievances and there was no specific policy mentioned that directly hindered social work practice with homeless Greenlanders.

During a meeting with one social worker, he speculated that the socio-economic support given to Greenland by Denmark can be seen as a form of reparation for colonisation. He said "*we would say to almost any other European country that you have to solve your own social problems. We are not saying it to Greenland (...) we are not always helping them because we are just making them escape their problems"* to elaborate the compensation mind set of social workers.

The political commitment of compensating Greenlanders affects the motivation of social workers who should adhere first to their professional commitment of helping others to help themselves or empower service users without pressure. Although the political commitment of helping Greenlanders is plausible, the way it is implemented might increase service dependency than empowerment (King *et al*, 2017).

Laura, the programme director for a homeless shelter, recommended that there should be a strategic channel that connects social work practice and interventions in Greenland and Denmark. This helps to handle or reduce the problems of Greenlanders before they travel to Denmark. For example, many of the homeless Greenlanders just arrive in Denmark without enough knowledge, information and plans. In explaining the extent of housing problem of Greenlanders, Laura said that "*for example in Nuuk Kommune, you cannot get someplace to live. There is 20 years of waiting for an apartment"*. To escape such situations, Greenlanders travel to Denmark, buying very expensive tickets and without money left in their hands. This can be taken as an indication of the need for coordinated social work practice between the two nations. Otherwise, social work interventions in Denmark only, will not result in sustainable solutions for homeless Greenlanders.

ISW intends to ensure cultural relevance and appropriateness in social work interventions. So, this practice starts with a clear understanding of the style of living, language and indigenous ideologies of the service users or the community and develop culturally appropriate programme or intervention fitting to it (Gray & Coates, 2010). Institutions working with Greenlandic populations should be aware of the Indigenous Internationalization, a concept which calls for an established network of indigenous people (Alaska, Canada, Greenland and other regions) for the purpose of sharing ideas and information that concerns moral and political influence on national governments and international bodies (Loukacheva, 2007; CWIS, 2018).

Collaborative work between the Greenland and Danish government in general, and the social work units in particular, is recommended. As indicated in the findings section, social work intervention that is exclusively left to Denmark would be a single-handed effort, leaving the sustainability of the outcome into question. Orienting, training and equipping Greenlanders before their departure to Denmark will help to share the burden of social work interventions taking place in Denmark.

CONCLUSION

The social mechanisms that generate homelessness must be understood as an open and contingent interplay between structural, historical, political, systemic, interpersonal and individual factors. Sociocultural factors were the main driving force of challenges for social work practice with homeless Greenlanders as practitioners have difficulties empowering Greenlanders amidst cultural differences and power dynamics. Language barriers were found to hinder communication and relationship building. While the symbolic capital of being a professional and its subsequent field of power creates resistance from service users who feel that such roles reinforce the historical, political and social implications of colonization. This extends to how institutional structures and power relations within social work institutions affect the social inclusion of homeless Greenlanders in Aalborg, as it often produces a misrecognition towards the implicit ways in which social services reinforce symbolic violence and fields of power between practitioners and service users. The tenants of ISW (such as cultural competency, recognition and participatory action) are emerging as effective strategies to support the needs of Indigenous populations migrating to Western societies. Far from having absolute conclusions, it is hoped that more investigations explore how indigenous social work can be used as a critical approach that offers greater insights to professionals in the field, working with Indigenous populations fighting for social inclusion.

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